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Written on JANUARY 21, 2013 AT 7:30 AM by VKREMER

# Commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Day: A Sailor's Perspective

Filed under FLEET AND THE FLEET MARINE FORCE, U.S. MARINE CORPS, U.S. NAVY

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Navy Medicine Education and Training Command (NMETC) Command Master Chief (SW/FMF) Rusty Perry observes an Advanced Dental Assistant Program student practice skills during his visit to the Surface Warfare Medical Institute in San Diego. Perry is the senior enlisted Sailor for Navy Medicine's formal enlisted and officer education and training programs, medical operational training, and medical and medical support personnel deploying worldwide and training that prepares aviators and shipboard crews to survive in land and water mishaps. (Courtesy photo)

“Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals...” -Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1964

Shipmates,

One of the pioneering minds of this past century penned those words nearly five decades ago, and while appropriate for that time in United States history – a time replete with internal strife and the onset of an overseas conflict which claimed the lives of nearly 60,000 U.S.

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service members, the Vietnam War – still ring true today.

Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, annually the third Monday in January, is designed to honor the chief spokesman for nonviolent activism in the civil rights movement which successfully protested racial discrimination in federal and state law.

As we celebrate this holiday, one of only three federal holidays named for an individual, reflect on the progress that we as individuals, as a Navy and as a nation have made, at least in some part due to the efforts of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The middle child of an Atlanta preacher, eventual Nobel Peace Prize winner and arguably the face of the Civil Rights Movement and non-violent protest, King said those words in 1964.

And as a career Sailor, I believe there is a direct correlation between Dr. King’s message and the values we as a Navy harbor today.

For the past 27 years, I’ve seen the Navy grow and change, and although I would like to think that our Core Values have remained unchanged since our formation nearly 300 years ago, they haven’t. The progress we’ve made as a country, as a Navy, as individuals, has shifted dramatically even in my time, and even moreso from the segregation and inequality Sailors classified as minority endured during some of the armed conflicts which have defined our nation.

Dr. Martin Luther King championed a sense of community, and I believe Sailors today appreciate a similar sense of loyalty to their community – the United States Navy – as well as to the concepts of dedication, an openness in diversity issues and the common ground they embrace whether aboard ship, on the ground or in the air.

As the Navy is a direct reflection of the society we have chosen to serve, the diverse racial, ethnic and religious makeup of the Sailors bolstering its ranks only serves to reinforce the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a fact that I – as a Sailor and medical professional – embrace.

Unlike the service members who paved the way for us, today, there is no color on the battlefields in which Sailors work side-by-side with their Army and Air Force counterparts. There is no race aboard ships at sea, no distinction on which bed in a U.S. Navy hospital or clinic one will receive based solely on the color of their skin. The very nature of the job we perform precludes anything other than the concerted efforts of those who have chosen to wear the uniform of the organization, the name of which is emblazoned above the left breast pocket of the U.S. Navy working uniform.

Even though there is a diverse array of cultures within the Navy, an enormous spectrum of upbringings and differences, there is little tension between those who come from different areas of the country, from different areas of the world.

During some of our darker moments, that wouldn’t have been the case.

African-Americans could only serve in limited capacities during some of the earlier conflicts in which the United States was involved, and even up until 50 years ago some communities within the Navy maintained a dividing line on what a person might accomplish, solely based on the color of his skin.

The progress we have made is not merely chance – think about that during this holiday. The Sailors who have gone before you have ensured the way of life we enjoy today through their sacrifice, through their commitment and courage, to persevere in the face of adversity from the country they chose to defend.

October 2014 (15)
September 2014 (20)
August 2014 (14)
July 2014 (13)
June 2014 (8)
May 2014 (11)
April 2014 (9)
March 2014 (14)
February 2014 (7)
January 2014 (7)
December 2013 (7)
November 2013 (12)
October 2013 (7)
September 2013 (14)
August 2013 (13)
July 2013 (11)
June 2013 (22)
May 2013 (15)
April 2013 (14)
March 2013 (14)
February 2013 (14)
January 2013 (12)
December 2012 (11)
November 2012 (11)
October 2012 (7)
September 2012 (9)
August 2012 (12)
July 2012 (13)
June 2012 (17)
May 2012 (22)
April 2012 (14)
March 2012 (13)
February 2012 (14)
January 2012 (13)
December 2011 (13)
November 2011 (20)
October 2011 (22)
September 2011 (12)
August 2011 (16)